

An Anarchist FAQ (01/17)

The Anarchist FAQ Editorial Collective

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Introduction

“Proletarians of the world, look into the depths of your own beings, seek out the truth and realise it yourselves: you will find it nowhere else”

— Peter Arshinov **The History of the Makhnovist Movement**

Welcome to our FAQ on anarchism

This FAQ was written by anarchists across the world in an attempt to present anarchist ideas and theory to those interested in it. It is a co-operative effort, produced by a (virtual) working group and it exists to present a useful organising tool for anarchists on-line and, hopefully, in the real world. It desires to present arguments on why you should be an anarchist as well as refuting common arguments against anarchism and other proposed solutions to the social problems we face.

As anarchist ideas seem so at odds with “common-sense” (such as “of course we need a state and capitalism”) we need to indicate **why** anarchists think like we do. Unlike many political theories, anarchism rejects flip answers and instead bases its ideas and ideals in an in-depth analysis of society and humanity. In order to do both anarchism and the reader justice we have summarised our arguments as much as possible without making them simplistic. We know that it is a lengthy document and may put off the casual observer but its length is unavoidable.

Readers may consider our use of extensive quoting as being an example of a “*quotation [being] a handy thing to have about, saving one the trouble of thinking for oneself*.” (A.A. Milne) This is not the case of course. We have included extensive quotations by many anarchist figures for three reasons. Firstly, to indicate that we are **not** making up our claims of what certain anarchists thought or argued for. Secondly, and most importantly, it allows us to link the past voices of anarchism with its present adherents. And lastly, the quotes are used for their ability to convey ideas succinctly rather than as an appeal to “authority.”

In addition, many quotes are used in order to allow readers to investigate the ideas of those quoted and to summarise facts and so save space. For example, a quote by Noam Chomsky on the development of capitalism by state protection ensures that we base our arguments on facts without having to present all the evidence and references Chomsky uses. Similarly, we quote experts on certain subjects (such as economics, for example) to support and bolster our analysis and claims.

We should also indicate the history of this FAQ. It was started in 1995 when a group of anarchists got together in order to write an FAQ refuting the claims of certain “libertarian” capitalists to being anarchists. Those who were involved in this project had spent many an hour on-line refuting claims by these people that capitalism and anarchism could go together. Finally, a group of net-activists decided the best thing was to produce an FAQ explaining why anarchism hates capitalism and why “anarcho” capitalists are not anarchists. However, after the suggestion of Mike

Huben (who maintains the “*Critiques of Libertarianism*” web-page) it was decided that a pro-Anarchist FAQ would be a better idea than an anti-“anarcho”-capitalist one. So the Anarchist FAQ was born. It still bears some of the signs of its past-history. For example it gives the likes of Ayn Rand, Murray Rothbard, and so on, far too much space outside of Section F — they really are not that important. However, as they present extreme examples of everyday capitalist ideology and assumptions, they do have their uses — they state clearly the authoritarian implications of capitalist ideology which its more moderate supporters try to hide or minimise.

We think that we have produced a useful on-line resource for anarchists and other anti-capitalists to use. Perhaps, in light of this, we should dedicate this anarchist FAQ to the many on-line “libertarian” capitalists who, because of their inane arguments, prompted us to start this work. Then again, that would give them too much credit. Outside the net they are irrelevant and on the net they are just annoying. As you may guess, sections F and G contain the bulk of this early anti-Libertarian FAQ and are included purely to refute the claim that an anarchist can be a supporter of capitalism that is relatively common on the net (in the real world this would not be required as almost all anarchists think that “anarcho”-capitalism is an oxymoron and that its supporters are not part of the anarchist movement).

So, while coming from a very specific reason, the FAQ has expanded into more than we originally imagined. It has become a general introduction about anarchism, its ideas and history. Because anarchism recognises that there are no easy answers and that freedom must be based on individual responsibility the FAQ is quite in-depth. As it also challenges a lot of assumptions, we have had to cover a lot of ground. We also admit that some of the “frequently asked questions” we have included are more frequently asked than others. This is due to the need to include relevant arguments and facts which otherwise may not have been included.

We are sure that many anarchists will not agree 100% with what we have written in the FAQ. That is to be expected in a movement based upon individual freedom and critical thought. However, we are sure that most anarchists will agree with most of what we present and respect those parts with which they do disagree with as genuine expressions of anarchist ideas and ideals. The anarchist movement is marked by wide-spread disagreement and argument about various aspects of anarchist ideas and how to apply them (but also, we must add, a wide-spread tolerance of differing viewpoints and a willingness to work together in spite of minor disagreements). We have attempted to reflect this in the FAQ and hope we have done a good job in presenting the ideas of all the anarchist tendencies we discuss.

We have no desire to write in stone what anarchism is and is not. Instead the FAQ is a starting point for people to read and learn for themselves about anarchism and translate that learning into direct action and self-activity. By so doing, we make anarchism a living theory, a product of individual and social self-activity. Only by applying our ideas in practice can we find their strengths and limitations and so develop anarchist theory in new directions and in light of new experiences. We hope that the FAQ both reflects and aids this process of self-activity and self-education.

We are sure that there are many issues that the FAQ does not address. If you think of anything we could add or feel you have a question and answer which should be included, get in contact with us. The FAQ is not our “property” but belongs to the whole anarchist movement and so aims to be an organic, living creation. We desire to see it grow and expand with new ideas and inputs from as many people as possible. If you want to get involved with the FAQ then contact us. Similarly, if others (particularly anarchists) want to distribute all or part of it then feel free.

It is a resource for the movement. For this reason we have “copylefted” An Anarchist FAQ (see www.gnu.org for details). By so doing we ensure that the FAQ remains a free product, available for use by all.

One last point. Language has changed a lot over the years and this applies to anarchist thinkers too. The use of the term “man” to refer to humanity is one such change. Needless to say, in today’s world such usage is inappropriate as it effectively ignores half the human race. For this reason the FAQ has tried to be gender neutral. However, this awareness is relatively recent and many anarchists (even the female ones like Emma Goldman) used the term “man” to refer to humanity as a whole. When we are quoting past comrades who use “man” in this way, it obviously means humanity as a whole rather than the male sex. Where possible, we add “woman”, “women”, “her” and so on but if this would result in making the quote unreadable, we have left it as it stands. We hope this makes our position clear.

So we hope that this FAQ entertains you and makes you think. Hopefully it will produce a few more anarchists and speed up the creation of an anarchist society. If all else fails, we have enjoyed ourselves creating the FAQ and have shown anarchism to be a viable, coherent political idea.

We dedicate this work to the millions of anarchists, living and dead, who tried and are trying to create a better world. An Anarchist FAQ was officially released on July 19th, 1996 for that reason — to celebrate the Spanish Revolution of 1936 and the heroism of the Spanish anarchist movement. We hope that our work here helps make the world a freer place.

The following self-proclaimed anarchists are (mostly) responsible for this FAQ:

- Iain McKay (main contributor and editor)
- Gary Elkin
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